

**CENTERING INDIGENOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION:
TOWARDS JUST AND RESILIENT ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE AT THE
MUSKWA-KECHIKA MANAGEMENT AREA**

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Defended on April 15th, 2019

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	3
Map of the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Background	
Conservation's Colonial History.....	8
Collaborative Conservation.....	11
Methods.....	14
Results and Discussion	
Muskwa-Kechika Site Description, Management Structure, and Advisory Board.....	15
First Nations Participation in Muskwa-Kechika Management.....	21
Troubles With Traditional Knowledge.....	24
Centering Politics.....	25
Governance Challenges.....	27
Management Innovations.....	29
Geographic Protection.....	30
Ways Forward.....	33
Conclusions.....	38
Future Research.....	39
Acknowledgements.....	41
References.....	43
Appendix	
Sample Interview Questions.....	49

ABSTRACT

This research examines the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area (MKMA), a collaborative conservation initiative in northeast British Columbia (BC). Established in 1998, the MKMA is a 6.4-million-hectare wilderness with abundant boreal species and cultural values for multiple Canadian First Nations. The region is managed to be preserved in its ecological and aesthetic integrity while allowing for regulated industrial activity.

During the summer of 2018, I conducted interviews with past and present members of the Muskwa-Kechika Advisory Board (a body comprised of representatives with diverse interests inside the MKMA), BC government officials, and others involved with the MKMA. Interviewees drew from their experiences participating in MKMA governance to discuss the strength of governance and the complexities of partnering with First Nations who have distinct political and cultural priorities on the land base.

Interview results illuminate two major challenges facing the MKMA. Despite low immediate industrial pressures, weaknesses in MKMA governance combined with heightened future pressures may jeopardize the longevity of the management vision. Additionally, despite the MKMA's mission to collaborate with First Nations, such collaboration has declined over time.

I conclude that collaborative conservation outcomes could be enhanced by an expanded focus from integrating Indigenous cultural values to prioritizing Indigenous political rights. While cultural recognition is important, it should not be considered the ultimate avenue for Indigenous participation. Rather, collaborative conservation should emphasize the rights of sovereign Indigenous Nations to govern the landscapes with which their nationhood is entwined. A fuller recognition of Indigenous rights could both motivate renewed First Nations participation and offer new strategies towards achieving just and resilient regional environmental governance.

[illegible]

Source: Muskwa-Kechika Advisory Board

INTRODUCTION

Given the rate of species extinction due to global habitat loss and climate change, landscape level conservation constitutes one of today's most critical issues. Complicating matters, it is now widely accepted that the classic approach to conservation—the so-called “Yellowstone model”—is inadequate (Brockington, Duffy, & Igoe, 2008). Named for Yellowstone National Park, this model draws on a conception of parks and protected areas as “living museums,” (Willow, 2015, p. 160), pockets of seemingly pristine wilderness that should be preserved for the sake of posterity. While sizeable parks are crucial for successful conservation efforts, preserving natural predator-prey interactions and population dynamics requires more than a protected area here and there. Rather, an extensive system of diverse landscapes interconnected by ecological corridors is necessary to preserve the diversity of life on earth (Soulé, 1985).

To curb the staggering rate of biodiversity loss occurring, conservation biologists have emphasized the need for increasingly ambitious global habitat protection goals (Dudley et al., 2018). E.O. Wilson, for example, famously supports the, “Half-Earth proposal,” (Wilson, 2017, p. 1) calling on the world to protect a full one half of earth's natural ecosystems. “By setting aside half the planet in reserve,” he writes, “we can save the living part of the environment and achieve the stabilization required for our own survival,” (ibid., p. 1). Though it transcends the Yellowstone Model's narrow vision, Wilson's proposal for a vast patchwork of large protected areas is subject to scrutiny, particularly in regards to its erasure of local and Indigenous people who depend on and have political claims to much of the land in question (Dudley et al., 2018). Dudley et al. (2018) emphasizes that while reserving half the earth as strictly protected areas remains a controversial idea, half earth as healthy, natural ecosystems is more politically

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

palatable. Thus, the authors argue that conservationists should turn to strategies that preserve ecosystem function while including human land uses.

Grasping the magnitude of the challenge of biodiversity conservation means that excluding people altogether from the land is no longer a viable option. It means embracing conservation as a social science and recognizing that social sustainability is a necessary precondition for environmentally sustainable development (Frost, 2017). From this vantage point, conservation becomes fundamentally concerned with the power-laden dynamics of land-use decision making, and specifically, with reconciling the different values that diverse communities see in a landscape. This entails imagining innovative solutions to sustainable land use, but also exploring the more fundamental, though contentious, questions of sovereignty and the rights to make land-use decisions. The latter implication brings issues of indigeneity to the forefront of conservation. Relieving tensions between local—particularly Indigenous—landscape users and conservationists is crucial to conservation success. Doing so means confronting the colonial histories that have shaped environmental governance in North America and elsewhere.

Collaborative conservation is one strategy used to achieve the reconciliation described above. This strategy actualizes the ideal that by integrating Indigenous cultural values and traditional knowledge and practices into land management, conservation can achieve more ecologically and socially sustainable outcomes. However, lacking active Indigenous leadership, attempts at integration can distort Indigenous values and collaborative conservation can perpetuate—rather than challenge—the colonial dynamics that dispossess Indigenous peoples and marginalize them from environmental governance processes.

This research explores governance of the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area (MKMA), a collaborative conservation initiative in northeast British Columbia (BC), Canada. Drawing on

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

interviews conducted with past and present members of the Muskwa-Kechika Advisory Board (MKAB), other involved personnel, and publicly available MKAB documents, I investigate the relationship between strategies of Indigenous-conservationist collaboration and the degree to which conservation goals are achieved. The original expectation was that First Nations collaboration would result in place-specific management practices that integrated scientific and traditional insights and furthered conservation goals. However, my research supports two alternative observations. First, by focusing on Indigenous cultural interests but sidelining their political ramifications, collaborative efforts at the MKMA have precluded meaningful First Nations participation. Second, I argue that geographic factors including remoteness, relative resource scarcity, and public misperception of the management purpose play larger roles in preserving wildlife and wilderness quality than does current government policy. While these factors continue sparing the MKMA from industrial incursion, they also illuminate the uncertainty of the MKMA's future in the face of heightened mineral, petroleum, logging, and wind energy interests. Unifying these findings, I ultimately propose that embracing Indigenous politics can help collaborative initiatives facilitate the co-creation of more socially just and legally resilient environmental conservation arrangements and contribute to the decolonization of conservation practice.

The following first presents a history of the conflict surrounding conservation efforts on Indigenous lands. This section draws on a broad range of literature before focusing on northwestern Canadian contexts. I then dive more deeply into collaborative conservation as a conflict resolution strategy and present critiques of the strategy that are relevant to the case study. Having laid the groundwork, I then turn directly to the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area. After a description of my research methods, I elaborate upon the MKMA landscape, its

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

ecological and cultural values, and its collaborative management structure. Next, drawing predominantly on my interviews, I discuss the extent of First Nations participation that has occurred since the MKMA's establishment in 1998. I then cite reports commissioned by the advisory board that illuminate difficulties in incorporating First Nations values into management. Informed by the two previous sections, the next articulates the disconnect between the MKAB's conception of culture as a management tool versus many Indigenous individuals' preoccupations with political rights recognition. The paper then takes a momentary turn, as I address the governance challenges that research participants described in interviews. I conclude this section by demonstrating that the forces protecting the MKMA today are much the same as they were prior to 1998. The remainder of the thesis draws on previous conservation and Indigenous rights literature, punctuated by insights from my interviews, to explore what a politically—and ecologically—resilient and anti-colonial landscape level conservation could look like in North America. While it offers no definitive answers, the paper concludes that Indigenous politics will play an increasingly central role in environmental governance debates and that embracing these politics is strategic for conservationists concerned with protecting the Muskwa-Kechika and other ecologically valuable regions.

BACKGROUND

Conservation's Colonial History

As an attempt to preserve ecological value on First Nations traditional territory, the MKMA is engaged with conservation's historical association with colonialism. Though conservation has been practiced globally in some shape or form for millennia, since the modern movement began, it has been riddled by conflict between conservationists and Indigenous peoples. Brockington et al. (2008) note that all major protected areas in the western United States

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

have a history of conflict with Native American communities. This conflict, argues Cronon (1995), arises because conservation's fixation on pristine environments contradicts the historical reality that these landscapes reflect millennia of Indigenous management. Thus, in the name of conservation, colonial states around the world have forcibly relocated Indigenous communities from their homes. As Neuman (2001) and others demonstrate, many of the people-free landscapes celebrated today as pristine wilderness have long human histories. Colonial policies uprooted Native people from their communities and relocated them to more concentrated settings where they would be closer to "civilizing influences" (p. 660). The landscapes stolen from Indigenous peoples across the world exist in the popular imagination as unchanged since the dawn of time. Yet, many of these areas can be more accurately understood as legacies of colonial control.

Tension between conservation—particularly, game preservation—and Indigenous interests is apparent in the history of Canada's Treaty 8. Signed in 1899, Treaty 8 relinquishes aboriginal title from 39 First Nations within an 840,000 square kilometer region including parts of British Columbia, Alberta, Northwest Territories, and Saskatchewan. In exchange, the treaty grants the nations interminable rights to "hunting, trapping and fishing throughout the tract surrendered," (Treaty 8 Agreement, 1899, p. 2). As Fumoleau (2004) describes, "[t]he Treaty was seen by the Indians as a friendship pact, which would permit peaceful settlement of the country; land surrender or relinquishment of title were not issues for them. However, there were certain basic assurances which they wanted from the government: freedom to hunt, trap, fish, and move freely," (p.100).

Canada quickly betrayed its treaty promises by imposing a system of Indian reserves and game preservation policies. For the Dogribs, Yellowknives, Chipewyans and other Treaty 8

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

Nations, being pushed onto reserves meant forgoing the rights to hunt and move freely about their treaty territory (ibid.). Game laws restricting hunting of caribou, moose, and muskrat further infringed on fundamental treaty rights. In 1920, these frustrations catalyzed a treaty boycott by the Fort Resolution Dogrib Band. The Band felt that game laws conflicted with the intent of Treaty 8. "If you say there is a caribou season," Chief Susie Drygeese reportedly told government agents, "we are not going to take that treaty...Why do you tell us how to run our land? We did not give it to you," (ibid., p. 126). Only after the agents agreed to eliminate closed seasons for the Dogrib Nation did Chief Drygeese accept treaty payments. In highlighting the inseparability of continuing traditional resource use from treaty rights, the chief's statement echoes common discourse in contemporary Indigenous activism. Further, this discourse contextualizes conservation, whether in the form of 19th century game laws or 21st century landscape management, within the ongoing debate over governance of contested land.

Given conservation's colonial legacy, today's conservationists must continuously self-scrutinize, or else risk reproducing and strengthening colonial injustices (Willow, 2016). While scientists debate the impacts of traditional land use on biodiversity conservation (Redford & Sanderson, 2000), these debates should not overshadow the imperative to imagine an anti-colonial future. Prominent conservation biologists Redford and Sanderson (2000) argue that, "traditional and indigenous people can claim incontrovertible rights to their land. As morally responsible humans we must support their struggle" (p. 1362). While their view is by no means dogma among conservation biologists, the authors' recognition is one of many reasons why engaging productively with local and Indigenous peoples is an increasingly central goal of conservation. To achieve this goal, many organizations and governments have turned to collaborative conservation arrangements. In analyzing the Muskwa-Kechika, this paper

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

contributes to the continuous evaluation of collaborative conservation initiatives that is necessary for ensuring sustainable social and ecological outcomes.

Collaborative Conservation

Collaborative conservation is the application of collaborative planning to natural resource, wildlife, or landscape management. This planning framework has been used by governments and international conservation organizations across the world in attempts to reconcile antagonism between government decision makers and local interests (Brandon & Wells, 1992; Willow, 2015). Its advocates argue that integrating local values into planning can defuse conflict and create more socially resilient conservation arrangements (Brandon & Wells, 1992). Though collaborative conservation arrangements vary in form from more economically focused integrated conservation-development projects (*ibid.*) to more socially focused co-management initiatives (Nadasdy, 2003), each form centers on engaging relevant stakeholders in development of local or regional conservation plans. The merits of collaborative planning have helped it replace the top-down technocratic planning paradigm that dominated until the 1990s (Gunton, Peter, & Day, 2006). BC's land and resource management planning (LRMP) processes showcase the transition from top-down to collaborative planning.

This transition was tied to growing conflict between stakeholders in BC's resource periphery during "post-Fordist" economic restructuring (Hayter, 2003). As the Cold War subsided, global social and economic changes disrupted resource governance throughout northern BC. Catalyzed by economic downturn during the early 1980s, neoliberal reform, organizationally-based environmentalism, and surging First Nations sovereignty movements collided, igniting a period of fierce conflict surrounding environmental governance in the province (*ibid.*). The infamous "war in the woods," raged as, "valley by valley people were

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

fighting over logging and mining impacts on the environment” (personal communication, April 26th, 2018). In an effort to quell the social upheaval, the recently empowered New Democratic Party (NDP) implemented the Commission on Resources and Environment in 1992 along with regional land and resource management planning processes (Day, Gunton, & Frame, 2003). Both institutions aimed to engage stakeholders in collaborative land planning throughout the entire province. As will be discussed later, the LRMP processes served as the primary avenue through which activists campaigned for the establishment of the Muskwa-Kechika. In its implementation of collaborative conservation, the MKMA adopted LRMP style multi-stakeholder planning, and as collaborative planning advocates would predict, the model has helped the MKMA avoid controversy. “Because the M-KMA Act and Muskwa-Kechika itself were created by consensus process...,” writes Sawchuk (2016), “the Act continues to enjoy an unprecedented level of support at the local level, almost twenty years after its initial creation,” (p. 290). However, the MKMA perpetuates both the benefits and drawbacks of stakeholder-based collaborative planning.

Critics of collaborative conservation posit that while the strategy diffuses conflict by introducing consensus-based decision making, it does so in a way that deepens—rather than challenges—the power of the colonial state over Indigenous peoples. Frame, Gunton, & Day (2004) conducted an overview assessment of LRMP tables across BC by surveying hundreds of participants regarding 25 success criteria. The surveys yielded overwhelmingly positive responses except in fields concerning “Equal Opportunity and Resources,” (p. 72), where 53 percent of participants reported that the LRMP process did not reduce power imbalances between sectors. Further, only 34 percent of their respondents felt that LRMP participants were on an equal playing field. By bridging competing interests through consensus-based land use

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

negotiation, the collaborative process serves as an important conflict resolution tool for environmental governance. However, as the survey indicates, conflict resolution—or avoidance—does not require an equitable solution (*ibid.*).

Numerous scholars agree that collaborative institutions conceal the politics of land-use decision making, preventing discussion of fundamental Indigenous concerns. In other words, while institutionalized collaboration facilitates discourse between diversely positioned users of a landscape, it constrains this discourse to the paradigms of dominant settler society, and therefore, precludes the possibility of imagining post-colonial environmental governance alternatives. Merino (2018) discusses how state institutions that encourage collaboration limit Indigenous power by bracketing the breadth of acceptable discourse. Indigenous political interests—concerning sovereignty or nation-to-nation relations—often exceed these brackets and are therefore left unaddressed. In examining a co-management regime with Kluane First Nation in the Yukon Territory, Nadasdy (2005) illustrates how the initiative provides a setting for traditional knowledge integration into management decisions, but simultaneously prevents it by limiting the definition of acceptable knowledge to that derived by western science. Thus, Nadasdy (2005) argues that co-management initiatives superficially present opportunities for First Nations self-empowerment, but are in fact “subtle expansions of empire,” (p. 225) deepening state sovereignty.

This “subtle expansion” alludes to James Fergusson’s concept of “anti-politics,” that is, by disengaging from questions of state power, discourse within collaborative initiatives simultaneously obscures and enforces it (Nadasdy, 2005). By normalizing Indigenous-state relations, collaborative conservation can perpetuate inequalities (Nadasdy, 2003). Brosius (1999) agrees and adds that institutionalizing trends in environmentalism shift its focus from the moral-

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

political to the managerial realm. These anti-politics relegate political concerns of Indigenous and local people to the status of “disruptive,” or at best, “irrelevant,” to collaborative initiatives (ibid., p. 51).

While collaborative conservation provides a space for dialogue and input from Indigenous participants, modes of participation as well as terms of acceptable discourse can be constrained to definitions that presuppose and normalize the paradigms and political authority of dominant society. These effects are rarely intentional, and possibly not even perceived by conservationists wishing to ally with Indigenous communities (Nadasdy, 2005). But despite well-intentioned collaborative initiatives, participants may still experience “continued marginalization within the very projects that purport to empower them” (Willow, 2016, p. 86). In the context of Canadian boreal forest collaborative management, Willow (2016) describes how some First Nations participants are fully aware of this dilemma. Rather than abandoning the project, however, many Indigenous leaders opt to remain cautiously involved, navigating the tradeoffs between gains made by participating in colonial institutions and the overarching need to find ways of transcending colonial relations. First Nations engagement with the Muskwa-Kechika reflects the insights reviewed above.

METHODS

During the summer of 2018, I spent five weeks in northeast British Columbia, based in the city of Fort Saint John. Just southeast of the MKMA, this city was chosen as a compromise between proximity to the study area and accessibility to the people who are involved in its management. During my time in the region, I focused on conducting interviews with past and present members of the Muskwa-Kechika Advisory Board (MKAB) as well as other government officials and activists who have been or remain involved in the area’s management or

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

establishment. In total, I conducted seven verbal interviews in person or over the phone and received one written response. While the interviews were fairly informal and changed from subject to subject, they flowed through similar sets of questions. Sample interview questions are listed in the appendix. The interviews were audio recorded then transcribed manually. After transcribing, I content coded each interview, highlighting key concepts and recurring themes. Unless noted as points of disagreement, quotes and ideas derived from my interviews that are used throughout the paper reflect views shared by many interview subjects. I collected additional information through informal face-to-face and electronic dialogue.

The small number of interviews is certainly a limitation of this study. However, interviews were constrained by a variety of factors. First, there are only 13 current MKAB members. Second, my short stay overlapped with holiday season during which many people travel. Third, there is no central location where potential interviewees are located. My interviews are supplemented by publicly available reports commissioned by the MKAB and my analysis draws from previous social scientific and ethnographic literature on the Muskwa-Kechika, collaborative conservation, and Indigenous movements.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Muskwa-Kechika Site Description, Management Structure, and Advisory Board

Most do not picture the northeast when envisioning the landscapes of the British Columbia. Just west of the Alberta border, approaching the latitude of Juneau, the land around Fort Saint John more closely resembles the great plains than it does the charismatic mountains and coastlines of much of BC. The northeast is a resource periphery in every sense (Willow, 2017). Originally a fur trading outpost, the city was put on the map during the Second World War when the United States Army built the Alaska Highway. Since then, the city has grown

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

tremendously. Locals call it the “Energetic City” due to the abundance of natural gas, forest products, and increasingly, hydroelectric power on the Peace River. A short drive west from the city, one finds the foothills of the Northern Canadian Rockies. Like Fort Saint John, towns in the foothills have built cultures around primary industries. Chetwynd, for instance, is centered around two timber mills. Its streets are decorated in impressive wooden sculptures, creations from the town’s annual chainsaw carving festival. Similarly, Hudson’s Hope takes pride in its, “dinosaurs and dams,” referring to the predominance of fossils in the area as well as the W.A.C. Bennett mega-dam on the Peace River that forms the second largest reservoir on the continent (ibid.). Moving north from Fort Saint John towards Fort Nelson, managed boreal forests gradually replace farm fields. The arc running from Fort Nelson, south through Fort Saint John, and west towards Chetwynd and Hudson’s Hope is patterned with harvested forests, yellow canola fields, natural gas pads, and two large dams. A third dam is under construction. In stark contrast, this arc cradles the Northern Canadian Rockies, which feature strikingly undisturbed habitat (Suzuki & Parker, 2016).

The area in these mountains, known today as the Muskwa-Kechika, was occupied by Indigenous people for millennia before European explorers, fur traders, and guide-outfitters began using the land. But despite its human history, the region has not experienced anywhere close to as much resource exploitation as other areas in the northeast. The earliest calls to preserve the land as wilderness may have come from the Peace River Wildlife Association in 1970. “By their nature,” members of the association proclaimed, “the values of outdoor recreation, wildlife, clean air and water cannot be held in tact in the face of other extensive resource utilizations, but we believe they may be retained in [the area] at relatively modest cost,” (Peterson, 1970, p. 1).

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

Though a wilderness designation was not granted at the time, development never occurred. In 1992, the provincial government released a map depicting undeveloped watersheds in BC. Contrasting the highly disturbed surroundings, the area between the Muskwa and Kechika rivers consisted of 50 continuous, undisturbed watersheds. Armed with this map, local and national wilderness advocates initiated a campaign to protect the Muskwa-Kechika (Sawchuk, 2016).

Concurrently, the BC provincial government initiated the aforementioned land and resource management planning process. This new land-use planning framework centered on stakeholder participation and a consensus-based approach to decision making. Recognizing that the Muskwa-Kechika's exceptional wilderness and wildlife values spanned adjacent portions of three LRMP regions—Fort Nelson, Fort St. John, and Mackenzie—conservationists ran a successful campaign to combine these portions into a single management area. In 1998, the provincial legislature passed the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area Act, calling for management of the region:

[T]o maintain in perpetuity the wilderness quality, and the diversity and abundance of wildlife and the ecosystems on which it depends while allowing resource development and use in parts of the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area designated for those purposes including recreation, hunting, trapping, timber harvesting, mineral exploration and mining, oil and gas exploration and development (Muskwa-Kechika Management Area Act, 1998).

This so called, “working wilderness” model calls for preserving the MKMA's ecological and aesthetic integrity while allowing for regulated industrial activity (Sawchuk, 2016).

The MKMA is a vast region in the Northern Canadian Rockies of BC (see map on page 3). Larger than West Virginia, the area covers 6.4-million-hectares of nearly roadless terrain and serves as a key core zone in the Yellowstone-to-Yukon wildlife corridor (Yellowstone to Yukon, n.d.). Its unfragmented mountain, foothill, and muskeg environments support habitat for a diverse and abundant array of boreal wildlife, including large mammals like moose, caribou, stone sheep, wolves, and grizzly bears (Suzuki & Parker, 2016). The Muskwa-Kechika's diverse, continuous landscape provides year-round habitat for these species and others, allowing natural predator-prey dynamics to flourish. The MKMA is therefore a globally significant site for the research and practice of conservation biology (Shultis & Rutledge, 2003). Due to the unique qualities described above, the area has served as a testing ground for innovative strategies of collaborative, and integrated resource management.

The MKMA is also, in whole or in part, overlapping with the traditional territory of thirteen Canadian First Nations. These include multiple Dane-Zaa, Sauteau, and Cree Treaty 8 Nations, Kaska Dena Nations, and Tsay Keh Dene Nation (Whiten, 2007). First Nations people continue traditional practices on the land such as hunting, trapping, and educating youth. The land base remains a vital component of First Nations' political and cultural identities (Churchill & Wills, 2003). In addition to ethnic and historical differences, these nations have distinct relationships with the Canadian state. Unlike the Treaty 8 Nations, Kaska Dena has not signed a treaty and continues modern treaty negotiations to this day (Kaska Dena Council, 2016). While First Nations are "encouraged to have a direct role in the implementation and monitoring" (Muskwa-Kechika Management Area Plan Regulation, 2010) of the MKMA management plan, a letter of understanding signed between the Kaska Dena Council and the BC premier in 1997 stipulates that the plan has no effect on aboriginal and treaty rights or treaty negotiations. As will

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

be discussed further, their distinct state relations have impacted the nations' respective engagement in MKMA governance.

The MKMA's working wilderness appears as a "reverse matrix" (personal communication, July 26, 2018) where, in contrast to the majority of North America, pockets of development exist periodically throughout a medium of negligible anthropogenic disturbance. The model functions by dividing the landscape into resource management zones (RMZs) ranging from provincial parks and protected areas to one small enhanced resource development zone along the Alaska Highway corridor. Between these two extremes, wildland zones and special management zones allow low to moderate development access, respectively. Even in the latter, resource developers are accountable to strict reclamation standards. Thus, the arrangement establishes core protected areas surrounded by semi-protected buffer zones. Prior to development in each RMZ, a series of plans must be completed. These include oil and gas pre-tenure plans and forestry landscape unit objectives. Wildlife, recreational, and parks management plans are also required (Mitchell-Banks 2007, p. 194). Prioritizing planning ensures that development is gradual, controlled, and consistent with the overarching vision of maintaining wilderness and wildlife values (Sawchuk, 2004).

This model of integrated management reflects critiques of the artificial dichotomy between human and non-human nature. Cronon (1995) argues that the concept of wilderness entrenches this dichotomy, making it acceptable to exploit non-pristine lands outside of protected areas. Instead of a conservation ethic centered on isolating nature, he advocates for one, "that will tell us as much about using nature as about not using it" (p. 16). Building upon Cronon's philosophical contribution, Rosenzweig (2003) calls for "reconciliation ecology," (p. 201), a planning mindset that optimizes non-human use through modification and diversification of

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

human-dominated landscapes. Such reconciliation is also possible on relatively wild landscapes. Polasky et al. (2005) draw from land-use models to demonstrate that on a “working landscape” conservation and economic objectives can thrive alongside one another. Well managed lands outside of protected areas often retain much of their biological value despite economic activity (ibid.). The MKMA’s so-called working wilderness model fits squarely into the conservation theory reviewed above.

The model is protected by the Muskwa-Kechika advisory board, a consensus-based body that considers the MKMA management intent as it advises provincial government decisions. As per the 1998 legislation, up to 17 members can be appointed to the board by the BC Premier. Members should reflect the diversity of interest groups on the landscape including First Nations, forestry, oil and gas, minerals, conservation, guide-outfitting, recreation, government, and others. While MKAB members may be affiliated with specific organizations, First Nations, or trade associations, as board members, they represent sector interests, rather than the specific positions of their respective affiliations. There are currently 13 members on the MKAB and the group meets at least once per year.

The MKMA management structure revolves around zoning, planning, and collaboration as tools for maintaining a working wilderness ideal. The RMZ system establishes a buffer-core arrangement with increasing levels of environmental protection. The industrial pre-planning phases ensure that development occurs intentionally with consideration given to non-economic values. Finally, the MKAB serves as a forum through which local landscape users can reach compromise and ensure that the management direction of the MKMA remains true to the legislation’s original intent. As the MKMA was first championed by a coalition between grassroots and national conservation interests, the focus on collaboration reflects a desire not

only to include but to emphasize local values in regional decision making. This marks a stark contrast from typical land planning in BC's periphery, which tends to be determined by southern—or even international—financial interests (Larsen, 2004; Willow, 2017). However, at the MKMA, as in other remote regions, this periphery-core dynamic is only one of many tensions that shape land use. The strong First Nations presence adds a dimension of complexity beyond core versus peripheral interests.

First Nations Participation in Muskwa-Kechika Management

Considering the cautious balance of First Nations participation described by Willow (2016), the following section describes the history and extent of First Nations involvement in MKMA governance. Despite the MKMA legislation's recognition of traditional land use and the advisory board's intention to "encourage" robust First Nations participation in management, Indigenous involvement has declined since the MKMA's founding in the late nineties. The primary avenue for Indigenous participation is the Muskwa-Kechika Advisory Board. The previously described 1997 Letter of Understanding between the Kaska Dena Council and the BC premier legally reserves four of 17 board seats for members of Kaska communities (Letter of Understanding, 1997). Treaty 8 and Tsay Keh Dene interests have considerably less representation, with no mandated seats. As will be discussed momentarily, the MKAB struggles to encourage Treaty 8 Nations participation. However, low participation began early on, during the land and resource management planning tables.

The Fort Nelson and Fort Saint John LRMPs occurred between 1993 and 1996 (Frame, Gunton, & Day, 2004). After receiving provincial approval in 1997, the least developed portions of these regions became the initial Muskwa-Kechika territory. In 2000, the Mackenzie district LRMP was approved, which contributed an additional 1.9-million hectares to the management

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

area's southwest (Muskwa-Kechika Advisory Board, n.d.). These LRMP processes operated on an interests-based, stakeholder model of collaborative land planning. Like today's MKAB members, LRMP participants represented abstract sectoral interests rather than concrete institutional positions. For First Nations participants, this meant forgoing formal band or nation representation. Rather, they could only voice the generalized interests of their demographic—as opposed to political—communities. Thus, discussions of First Nations political issues like treaty rights and land claims were tabled in favor of narrowly defined cultural topics like respecting traditional land use and integrating traditional knowledge into management. Because of the requirement to ignore treaty issues, First Nations individuals opted to participate as mere observers. Reflecting on the LRMPs, participants identify the low levels of First Nations involvement as a primary limitation of the process. “It left a bad taste in the mouths of some First Nations,” one Euro-Canadian participant recalled, “because checking your rights at the door, when you come into a negotiation or discussion room, that's a challenging thing. And rightly so, they feel that was inappropriate” (personal communication, May 30, 2018).

Nonetheless, Indigenous involvement was instrumental to the creation of the MKMA during the LRMP process. In partnership with national and local conservation and wildlife interests, Kaska Dena Nation in particular, played and continues to play a central—though limited—role in the MKMA. While the Kaska Dena Council did not formally endorse the LRMP outcome, Kaska members remained at the Fort Nelson LRMP table for its entire duration and contributed to MKMA park and protected area delineation. Their presence ensured that Kaska interests would be central to MKMA management. For instance, the Kaska Dena Council partnered with the MKAB to organize a Muskwa-Kechika Environmental Youth Camp for Indigenous youth most summers between 1999 and 2009 (Kaska Dena Council, n.d.). While

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

Kaska individuals remain involved with the management area, their council continues treaty negotiations that will impact the region. Central to these negotiations are land claims processes that define a hierarchy of Kaska Dena title throughout their unceded traditional territory (Kaska Dena Council, 2016). These government-to-government negotiations operate at a higher level of governance than the MKAB. Despite the overlap between the territory in question and the MKMA, Muskwa-Kechika board members have no way to know how negotiations will impact their activity. “I don’t know if they’ve done it, or if they are supposed to,” explained a prominent board member, “but the First Nations should be working on land-use plans too. It’s something we don’t know much about because...it’s another government-to-government thing” (personal communication, July 31, 2018). While the MKAB offers one avenue through which Kaska Dena Nation influences management in their traditional territory, the Kaska Dena Council exercises more tangible governing power through the overtly political realm of government-to-government treaty negotiations.

From the start, there was considerably less Treaty 8 involvement. Unlike Kaska, Treaty 8 Nations had already signed a treaty and, as a point of consensus between my interviewees, they did not want to compromise their status by participating in the stakeholder-oriented LRMP process. Thus, their interests are not reflected in the plans, and they have little representation on the MKAB. While the initial board included three Treaty 8 members, since 1998, Treaty 8 involvement has dwindled. Their absence frustrates current board members. “We really need some Treaty 8 folks on the board,” one member remarked, “because a lot of the stuff that goes on out there is in their backyard and their interests” (personal communication, August 9, 2018). Members also recognize that failures during the LRMP processes contributed to Treaty 8 resentment toward the Muskwa-Kechika. “[Initially], most of the discussions and input came

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

from the Kaska,” explained a former board member, “It wasn’t until after the Muskwa-Kechika was formed...that [government] realized that Treaty 8 lands make up a significant portion of [it]...Treaty 8 basically came late to the table, and I think they felt that they were disadvantaged by that” (personal communication, July 16, 2018). A Treaty 8 affiliated contact put it slightly differently, suggesting that it wasn’t a matter of “coming late to the table,” but rather, a perception of exclusion from the LRMP process (personal communication, July 14th, 2018). In addition to feeling disadvantaged during the establishment of the MKMA, Treaty 8 Nations discount the value in participating on the board. As a regional government administrator insisted, “the advisory board is just a board. It does not have any particular authority” (personal communication, August 13, 2018). Like for Kaska Dena Nation, engaging directly with government at the level of international negotiation offers a more powerful and strategic avenue for Treaty 8 Nations to govern their territories.

Troubles with Traditional Knowledge

Having provided a general description of First Nations participation, the paper now turns to a case example illustrating the complexities of Indigenous-conservationist collaboration. In 2003, the Muskwa-Kechika Advisory Board held a workshop in Fort Nelson focused on incorporating First Nations values into the MKMA. The workshop proceedings illuminate a mismatch between First Nations political concerns and the MKAB’s interest in depoliticized cultural values. Focused largely on integrating traditional knowledge into MKMA management, the workshop aimed to direct the central principles of the MKMA and to encourage greater Indigenous involvement. This workshop—along with a similar study commissioned by the MKAB in 2007—identify two major factors that limit the depth of First Nations participation. First, Indigenous political concerns remain unaddressed. While the workshop respected and

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

aimed to support First Nations cultural practices, First Nation members were preoccupied by political priorities, namely treaty rights and negotiations (Churchill & Wills, 2003). There had been scant government-to-government consultations in establishing management plans inside the MKMA and of particular Treaty 8 concern, there is no traditional territory or rights recognition in the MKMA legislation (Whiten, 2007). As expressed during the workshop, once political rights are addressed, questions of traditional knowledge and land use, collaborative game management, and other tenets of collaborative conservation become more relevant (Churchill & Wills, 2003). Second, First Nations people are skeptical of government and advisory board motives in incorporating traditional knowledge. The 2007 study highlights how First Nations representatives fear that if traditional values do not corroborate governmental agendas, they will simply be ignored (Whiten, 2007).

This is not to condemn the MKAB's sincere interest in letting traditional knowledge inform management practices. However, I argue that the board's focus on culture is misplaced. For many Indigenous people, culture and politics are inextricably linked. "Life came from the land," explained Treaty 8 members at the workshop, "how can we talk about other things until the land issues are talked about[?]" (Churchill & Wills, 2003, p. 30). Similarly, a member of both the Kaska Dena Council and MKAB suggested that traditional knowledge and practices can play a political role within the context of land claims and treaty negotiations (*ibid.*). Informed by workshop participants' cultural valuation of the land, these statements emphasize the need to prioritize politics.

Centering Politics

The description above demonstrates that contrary to the MKMA model's implicit assumptions, culture and politics are inseparable. Though the MKMA respects traditional land

CENTERING INDIGENOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

use and Indigenous cultural values, the more fundamental issue of who has the right to make decisions on the land has never been resolved. “[I]t’s like carving up the rooms of the house when the base ownership of the house hasn’t been determined,” explained a local Euro-Canadian community activist, “...you’re making decisions on a land base [where] the rights of ownership have not been settled” (personal communication, July 20, 2018). The MKAB’s well-intentioned desire to incorporate First Nations values has proven difficult because doing so means asking fundamental political questions regarding topics like colonialism and sovereignty that the MKAB is not designed to address. The limited involvement of First Nations in MKMA management and their decisions to focus more on government-to-government engagement is symptomatic of this disconnect.

Like Willow (2016) observed in the same region, First Nations people at the MKMA must balance between impacting management decisions on their traditional territory through colonial institutions and circumventing these institutions altogether. The different stages of the treaty process in which Kaska Dena Nation and Treaty 8 Nations find themselves have impacted their respective levels of involvement, however, both groups prioritize higher level political arenas as they strive to assert forms of sovereignty. Unlike the MKAB, these arenas accommodate debate over First Nations political interests. By emphasizing Indigenous cultural ties to the landscape but ignoring their political ramifications, the MKMA defeats its own goal of encouraging active First Nations participation. Apolitical questions such as, “[w]hat traditional knowledge and First Nations values should shape the management of the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area?” (Churchill & Wills, 2003, p. 25), which was posed at the 2003 workshop, contribute to a discourse that shrouds the political nature of land-use decision making. Recognizing that these anti-politics normalize the colonial status quo, many First Nations choose

to focus most of their resources elsewhere. Though the MKMA collaborative conservation model is championed as a means to reconcile Indigenous interests and state management, my observations suggest that such reconciliation is hindered by the model's subordination of Indigenous political priorities to more basic questions of managerial practice.

Likewise, the model for ecological protection proposed by the MKMA appears to fall short of fulfilling the idealistic vision of the initiative's enabling legislation. Before relating these social and ecological challenges through discussion of an Indigenous rights-based legal strategy of environmental protection, I will elaborate briefly on the challenges hindering ecologically-minded environmental governance at the Muskwa-Kechika.

Governance Challenges

Despite the Muskwa-Kechika Act's mandate to preserve wilderness and wildlife, Mitchell-Banks (2007) highlights the legislation's and accompanying plan's inability to center these values in the area's management. The author first points to the legislation's failure to establish connections and hierarchies linking each planning phase. The lack of a coherent vision outlining how the five required RMZ plans synergize hinders integrated management. Second, he highlights that certain key elements of the wilderness and wildlife planning processes remained incomplete while industrial planning went ahead. These incomplete elements include establishing ecological and aesthetic baselines for cumulative impact assessment such as limits of acceptable change and visitor carrying capacity. Additionally, a wilderness definition was never established, complicating the legislative mandate to preserve wilderness quality (*ibid.*). While much progress has been made in this respect since 2007, establishing an acceptable wilderness definition and metric remains a central task of the MKAB. The third shortcoming identified by Mitchell-Banks (2007) is the lack of financial and human resources provided by the

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

province. This is a significant roadblock preventing effective planning. The MKMA legislation established a trust fund to finance research and management operations within the area. While this fund was initially allotted \$3-million CAD per year, it was reduced to \$1-million after 2001, when the BC Liberal Party unseated the New Democratic Party in the provincial government. Today, despite the NDP being back in government, the MKAB operating budget is less than \$100,000. Other changes made by the Liberal government further jeopardized the viability of the MKMA as a model working wilderness.

Unlike the progressive NDP, the conservative BC Liberals were not sympathetic to the ideals of the MKMA. Various changes were made to the MKMA Act making it friendlier to industry. Significantly, joint ministerial sign-off was removed from the legislation. The 1998 legislation required that each RMZ plan would be approved by multiple provincial ministries. For example, oil and gas pre-tenure plans would not only be approved by the ministry of Energy and Mines, but by Environment, Lands and Parks, too. This provision functioned to slow industrial expansion into the MKMA by introducing bureaucratic friction and by emphasizing the region's environmental mandate. The current legislation does not include joint sign-off, allowing industrial development to proceed more easily without significant investigation into wilderness and wildlife impacts. Coupled with the first shortcoming identified above—the failure to synthesize planning phases—the removal of joint sign-off has allowed industrial plans to be fast tracked while parks and wildlife plans remain incomplete. In addition to removing joint sign-off, the Liberal government demonstrated the fragility of the MKMA's protected areas by redrawing the boundaries of the Graham-Laurier provincial park in the southern portion of the region to make way for industrial infrastructure.

The legislative protection of the MKMA has proven to be vulnerable to the whims of changing governments and politicians. As one board member acknowledged, “Government can change the [Muskwa-Kechika] at any point...It’s hanging by a thread,” (personal communication, May 30, 2018). Similar sentiment was echoed by many other members. “Well, anything can change,” said a board member representing sport hunters, “if the government decides to change statutes and stuff they can get rid of the [Muskwa-Kechika] with the stroke of a pen” (personal communication, August 6, 2018). Yet, the MKMA landscape remains relatively undisturbed, and its wilderness characteristics—though nebulously defined—persist. Two main factors contribute to the MKMA’s apparent success: innovative management strategies and geographic luck.

Management Innovations

Despite the shortcomings discussed above, it would be unfair to characterize the MKMA as a collaborative conservation failure. In fact, it has spearheaded certain innovations in integrated management that should be adopted elsewhere. Access management is one field where the MKMA has made significant accomplishments. Roads fragment landscapes, allowing greater access to resources in the interior and opportunities for further fragmentation as offshoot roads are established. They also degrade the sense of wilderness by introducing linear features into the environment. In accordance with the MKMA management intent to preserve wilderness while allowing some industrial development, the MKAB recommends high standards for oil and gas infrastructure development that minimize industry’s imprint on the land. An example commonly cited by board members was the use of a snowpack road to access an oil well site in the interior. With this method, the developer was able to access the well and finish drilling without creating a permanent road, compacting soil, or leaving other lasting disturbances besides at the well site

itself. Management practices also emphasize wildlife protection. A pre-tenure planning process in the Sulphur / 8 mile RMZ in the MKMA's northeast led to an extended study between 2005 and 2010 on stone sheep populations. This study provided management guidelines to ensure that oil and gas development would have had the least possible impact on wildlife populations (Hengeveld & Cubberly, 2012). However, development in Sulphur / 8 mile never occurred due to the second factor protecting the MKMA, geographic luck.

Geographic Protection

Though deep-well conventional oil exists in the MKMA along the Northern Canadian Rockies' eastern slopes (Suzuki & Parker, 2016), over the course of the stone sheep study it became less and less attractive to industry. The shale oil and gas boom of the early 2000s, shifted industrial interests east, outside of MKMA boundaries, where more economical oil and gas was made accessible by hydraulic fracturing. This "fluke in geology," (personal communication, May 30, 2018), has, to this point in time, spared the MKMA's legislative strength from being seriously tested against industrial interests. Similarly, geographical factors like high slope and elevation mean that the MKMA contains little marketable timber. Forestry potential is limited to two pockets: the Aeroplane RMZ in the north and the Fox RMZ in the south (Suzuki & Parker, 2016). The latter is near the extremely remote First Nations town of Kwadacha, where infrastructure and access issues complicate logging operations. Even in areas with marketable resources, without adequate infrastructure, development is unlikely to occur.

The most immediate development possibility comes from the renewable energy sector. While accessible gas is scarce along the eastern slopes, the region is well suited for wind power development (*ibid.*). Unlike extractive infrastructure, wind turbines do not expire when resources run dry and require extended maintenance access. These differences necessitate permanent roads,

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

which compromise wilderness characteristics and create potential for further road encroachment. Complicating matters further, large scale wind is a relatively new industry that was not considered during the LRMPs. The plans offer no guidance to the MKAB regarding how to address wind power in the Muskwa-Kechika.

As discussed previously, access management is central to conservation success in the MKMA because wilderness is in a way self-perpetuating. However, once access proliferates, it fragments the landscape, allowing for further and further fragmentation. While the state of remoteness prevents immediate industrial use, it does not secure wilderness preservation “in perpetuity.” Once it becomes economically reasonable to extract from the MKMA, industrial interest will likely reemerge.

Finally, public perception and misconception of the region may provide the MKMA with an additional level of protection from industrial activity. “There’s probably only a handful of people who understand the concept of a management area,” (personal communication, July 20, 2018), one interviewee pointed out. For most, the MKMA is misunderstood as a massive protected area, closed off to industry. A board member seconded this point, recalling how mining prospectors were under the impression that it would be impossible to get a new mine approved inside the region. Ironically, while conservationists may be correct in thinking that the MKMA is politically vulnerable to industrial developments, advertisement of the area as a pristine wilderness region is working to dissuade developers. The identity constructed around the MKMA adds a less physical layer of geographic protection.

The ecological integrity of the MKMA remains intact despite the losses of joint sign-off, board funding, and more generally, government support. But as a local community member who was involved with the MKMA during its inception explained, “it’s intact because so far it hasn’t

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

been challenged” (personal communication, July 20, 2018). Nonetheless, the MKMA model has proven to withstand political change. “That’s extremely significant,” argued the same person, “[The MKMA is] compromised, weakened from the original intent. But the model, I believe, is a good one for continued debates over land use” (ibid.). A current board member and former LRMP participant was more optimistic, suggesting that the oil and gas pre-tenure plans offer significant protection. “We spent a lot of time working on [them]...if you’re gonna drill or do exploration in the MK...The constraints are going to be higher, the environmental issues are going to be more at the forefront...It’s not that gold rush mentality like it was in the good old days” (personal communication, August 9, 2018).

While this may well be true, a more critical contact disagreed. “There’s no real difference between management inside the MK and management outside,” the former board member argued, “...You can’t manage a place with no funds and no staff” (personal communication, April 26, 2018). Despite the MKMA’s successes, the range in perspectives shared by those who have been involved in its management highlights its uncertain future. More certain, however, are the roles of geographic factors including self-perpetuating remoteness, fortunate resource distribution, and public misperception in preventing the management model from being seriously tested against industrial interests. Besides public misperception, these are much the same factors as those that kept the area pristine before the MKMA’s establishment. While these factors guard the MKMA’s wildlife and its habitat for now, Sawchuk (2016) contends that, “[it] is certain that in the future there will be pressure to fulfil the mandate created by the Act, and to allow more industrial activities within the [MKMA]” (p. 290). How should conservationists respond to this looming challenge?

Ways Forward

Sawchuk (2016) continues, arguing that when the time comes, “there must be a core of committed proponents and supporters of the original vision for the Muskwa-Kechika who will...hold decision makers accountable for fulfilling the vision of the [Act]” (p. 290). While this vision of a working wilderness creates a development mandate, it does so in a way that prioritizes non-economic values. I argue that in addition to the role of motivated activists in defending the MKMA Act’s original intent, there is potential for conservationists to align themselves with First Nations in pursuit of a political solution to the area’s governance weaknesses. Embracing Indigenous rights could address both challenges facing the MKMA. First, it would motivate renewed First Nations interest by confronting the colonial anti-politics of collaborative conservation. Second, it would strengthen the MKMA’s legal backbone by adding constitutionally protected Aboriginal and treaty rights to the fragile safeguards of current legislation.

The conservationists and others who champion the MKMA certainly did not intend for the initiative to further contemporary colonialism. “That area is fundamental to the long-term survival of First Nations,” one conservationist reflected, “It is a part of who they are. They could not give that up ever” (personal communication, May 30, 2018). Others cited First Nations treatment as stakeholders as a central flaw in the MKMA arrangement. However, to reemphasize a previous point, without constant vigilance, colonial tendencies are likely to reproduce themselves within conservation arrangements (Willow, 2016). The remainder of this thesis begins to describe an approach to decolonizing conservation practice that may be applicable to the Muskwa-Kechika and elsewhere.

CENTERING INDIGENOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

Grossman (2017) argues that embracing Indigenous politics not only helps produce a more just relationship between conservationists and Indigenous people, but that it offers promising legal advantages that can further conservation goals. Drawing on cases of Indigenous-settler alliances from across the northern US, Grossman observes that tribes can leverage treaty rights to defend environmental protection to a greater degree than by appealing to conventional environmental law. For example, treaty rights that promise harvestable salmon runs mandate much higher environmental standards than the US Endangered Species Act. Canadian First Nations possess similar, if not stronger, legal advantages. These include treaty rights as well as Aboriginal rights, both enshrined in section 35(1) of the Canadian constitution (Turner, 2006). Canadian Supreme Court legal precedent, most notably *Tsilhqot'in Nation vs. British Columbia* (2014), recognizes that for areas never formally ceded through treaties, "Aboriginal title can exist over large tracts of land" (Kaska Dena Council, 2016, p. 1). The same decision also establishes that resource development on lands with proven Aboriginal title requires prior First Nations consent. Aboriginal title can be proven through courts or, as is the case for Kaska Dena, through modern day treaty negotiations. Either way, claims to Aboriginal title are tied to so-called, "counter-mapping," (Willow, 2013), a process through which Indigenous communities delineate traditional territory to establish legally recognized property boundaries. In contrast to the use of traditional knowledge in collaborative planning, this process wields cultural values as tools to substantiate claims of sovereignty. Three tiers of Aboriginal title ranging from fee-simple ownership to shared government-to-government decision making are being discussed for traditional Kaska Dena territory in BC. The intermediate tier, Kaska Dena stewardship lands, would constitute much of the MKMA interior. On these lands, private and public projects would require Kaska Dena consent prior to implementation (Kaska Dena Council, 2016).

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

A legal strategy centered around Aboriginal rights has the potential to transform large landscape governance, especially in places like the MKMA. One conservationist saw this transformation as necessary to preserve the working wilderness ideal. “There is an opportunity seated in the rights of First Nations,” he proposed, “to resuscitate and improve the Muskwa-Kechika” (personal communication, April 26th, 2018). Allowing delicate and deliberate resource development, the MKMA’s management orientation makes it an apt setting for the non-exclusionary protections that First Nations rights could provide. Backing the political priorities of First Nations as they assert sovereignty over unceded territories offers conservationists a chance to decolonize their practice by supporting Indigenous struggles—all while promoting strict oversight of industrial activities on the landscape. Importantly, this strategy does not mean exploiting Indigenous rights for outsider gain, nor is it based on the problematic assumption that Indigenous and conservationist interest always align. This assumption both jeopardizes conservation outcomes and disrespects Indigenous peoples (Redford & Sanderson, 2000). On the contrary, the legal strategy means amplifying Indigenous political interests in recognition that Indigenous nations possess greater authority to govern the lands that are central to their cultural and political existence. It also appears to be a promising route for establishing resilient, constitutionally protected environmental governance in Canada.

In their description of the case of the Great Bear Rainforest Low and Shaw (2011) demonstrate how a strategy centered on Indigenous rights can succeed in BC. They also show that environmental conservation and First Nations movements can align despite differing—and often contentious—visions for environmental governance. A key insight from their analysis is that while the establishment of the Great Bear Rainforest involved Indigenous communities in agreements surrounding environmental governance, these agreements were, “part of a larger

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

process whose purpose [was] to help reconcile Aboriginal rights and title to First Nations traditional territories” (p. 25). Thus, the legal approaches centered on First Nations rights are not only strategic in the realm of conservation, but also in Indigenous political struggles.

Temagami scholar, Dale Turner (2006) agrees, claiming that legal approaches are necessary for protecting First Nations interests, culture, “rights, sovereignty, and nationhood” (p. 110). The author advocates for Indigenous engagement with “the Canadian state’s legal and political discourses in more effective ways” (ibid., p. 5). Turner’s view is essentially pragmatic. While a colonial relationship persists in Canada, if First Nations wish to exercise greater sovereignty, they have no choice but to participate in the institutions and cater to the legal logic of the powers that be. Therefore, the courts are a medium through which Indigenous people can protect their interests and establish terms of a post-colonial relationship. Based in state-recognized Aboriginal title, the Kaska strategy discussed above adopts Turner’s school of thought. Of course, this strategy is not without its critics.

Coulthard (2014), of Yellowknives Dene, for instance, argues that Turner (2006) overestimates Indigenous legal action’s potential to transcend Canadian hegemony by operating within the state’s legal system—a system that “is hopelessly entwined with the economic, political, and military might of the state” (p. 47). Moreover, despite its legal benefits, the property-oriented counter-mapping strategy can be seen as antithetical to the Indigenous values it is employed to strengthen. Specifically, the legal definitions of property used in land claims processes contradict traditional human-land relationships as understood by members of many Indigenous communities (Nadasdy, 2002). “To speak of aboriginal-land relations as property relations is to *deny*, rather than merely ‘gloss over,’ their essential dynamic” (ibid., p. 252). Somewhat paradoxically, a similar dilemma arises for First Nations communities engaged in

CENTERING INDIGENOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

overtly political counter-mapping as it does for those engaged in anti-political collaborative land management. The strategy, “confronts a racist and exclusionary colonial past, yet reinforces differences and inequalities in the colonial present” (Wainwright & Bryan, 2009, p. 154). Kaska Dena Nation and others turning to this legal strategy still must navigate delicate cultural and political tradeoffs.

I have only afforded two paragraphs to the debate among Indigenous and Indigenous ally activists and scholars regarding strategies for truly anti-colonial practice. While this topic deserves—and receives—volumes, it is beyond the scope of my thesis. The fact of the matter is that given the political circumstances in Canada and elsewhere—the Tsilhqot’in Nation vs. British Columbia decision being no small part—Indigenous communities are turning to the legal strategy to secure their rights to govern traditional territory. Despite their recognition of its limitations, scholars seem to agree that this strategy offers tangible benefits to Indigenous communities’ legal standing (Wainwright & Bryan, 2009; Willow, 2013). Further, and more relevant to conservation efforts, Indigenous legal action is already transforming environmental governance in British Columbia (Low & Shaw, 2011). These transformations have the potential to foster positive changes. After all, much Indigenous legal action is catalyzed by struggles to prevent industrial overexploitation on traditional territory (Willow, 2013; Frost, 2017). In the case of the MKMA, the ongoing Kaska Dena negotiations will continue offering opportunities to change and improve governance of the area. Supporting Indigenous political efforts is strategic for conservationists in the sense that First Nations rights can provide a legal backbone for environmental protection. Beyond this, amplifying Indigenous politics is a step towards addressing conservation’s colonial history and reconfiguring the movement into an anti-colonial force.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the historical association between conservation and Indigenous dispossession, this thesis examined Indigenous-conservationist collaboration at the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area. I argue that the issue of sovereignty is fundamental to environmental governance.

However, collaborative conservation initiatives too often circumvent this issue, focusing instead on integrating depoliticized cultural values into management practice. Yet, these cultural values still carry political meaning for many Indigenous people. This disconnect pushes First Nations away from engaging with the Muskwa-Kechika, reflecting a pattern identified in previous case studies. Regarding conservation success at the MKMA, I further contend that the MKMA Act provides fragile protection for the region's wilderness and wildlife. To date, the area's remoteness, geological conditions, and public perception are the primary factors dissuading development.

Towards more just and resilient conservation strategy, the MKMA example supports the argument that conservationists should not try to isolate culture from politics as they strive to collaborate meaningfully with Indigenous communities. Indigenous movements are reshaping environmental governance, especially in British Columbia. Engaging with the politics around which these movements are built is necessary if conservationists are to collaborate effectively with Indigenous communities. This is strategic on two fronts. First, it is, "increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for environmentalists to pursue campaigns focused on resource use or management without the support of affected First Nations" (Low & Shaw, 2011, p. 14). Second, and more significantly, Indigenous land claims, treaty rights, and government-to-government negotiations offer promising avenues for establishing effective, resilient, multi-use

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

environmental governance arrangements—the sort that make large landscape conservation feasible.

I do not intend for this paper to criticize the conservationists and others who worked to designate the MKMA in the 1990s, nor those who continue serving on its advisory board today. On the contrary, I believe that the efforts made so far to protect the region into the future should be celebrated as a great conservation achievement. Furthermore, my critiques of collaborative conservation and governance strength at the MKMA reflect the political circumstances of the province—the LRMP processes and shifting government agendas—more so than the individual decisions of MKMA activists and board members. Harking back to Sawchuk's (2016) appeal to a future generation of MKMA activists prepared to hold government accountable to the working wilderness ideal, I hope this research provides some insight that may inform their strategy. Beyond the Muskwa-Kechika, this research can serve as a tool for landscape level conservation advocates confronting colonial legacies elsewhere.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This research has generated many questions worth exploring regarding the Muskwa-Kechika, collaborative conservation, and the Indigenous politics of conservation. First, the research I have already conducted would be enhanced by a more extended process of relationship building with MKAB members and others in the region. Though my interviews did capture key elements of the MKMA story, this type of research requires trust and reciprocity that is hard to establish in just five weeks. Participant observation in MKAB affairs, MKMA tourism, and related spaces would greatly enhance future research outcomes. Collaborative research with MKMA advocates and First Nations leaders working towards land governance agreements could

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

ensure that future research is directed by the needs and interests of the communities in question. This would enhance the quality and relevance of interviews and research conclusions.

Four concrete research themes come to mind and are listed here in the order that they were conceived of during the research process. First, the MKAB is in the process of finalizing a framework for defining and quantifying wilderness values. Their methods may have implications for landscape level conservation around the world and certainly generate philosophical questions about “managing for wilderness” that are worth exploring in greater depth. Second, though the MKMA was established after grassroots efforts, my research suggests that it suffers from many of the same governance challenges as top-down initiatives. Exploring the institutionalization of the MKMA idea could provide valuable information for collaborative conservation advocates. Third, a comparative study between the MKMA and the Great Bear Rainforest could illuminate the emergence of First Nations politics in Canadian landscape conservation initiatives and offer useful information for conservation practitioners and Indigenous activists alike. Fourth, it is important to scrutinize the proposed legal strategy. Particularly, there is need to explore the impacts that Kaska Dena Nation treaty negotiations are having on Treaty 8 Nations who do not have the luxury of starting the treaty process from scratch. Do tensions exist between treaty and non-treaty nations? What does the legal strategy mean for overlapping traditional territories? On the other hand, further research could investigate conservationists’ perspectives on the strategy. What roadblocks exist to fomenting the political collaboration described in this paper? Why might conservationists be weary of such an approach? What about it might they see as promising? Each of these areas for further research offer valuable avenues for understanding the complexities of large-scale environmental governance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without a network of support coming from all directions. First and foremost, thank you to the Muskwa-Kechika advisory board members and others, who have worked tirelessly to fulfil the vision of the MKMA and who were willing to share their experiences with me. I am grateful for the tremendous hospitality and generosity displayed by these people during my time in and around the Muskwa-Kechika.

I would also like to thank my committee members: Dr. Anna Willow, Dr. Jeremy Brooks, and Dr. Lauren Pintor.

Dr. Willow, my primary thesis advisor, initially exposed me to the Muskwa-Kechika and introduced me to numerous contacts whom I interviewed. She also patiently guided me through just about every component of the thesis process, sharing resources, helping with IRB approval and grant proposals, and finally, reading and reviewing my thesis drafts. This thesis would not have materialized without her patient guidance.

Dr. Brooks, my faculty advisor in the School of Environment and Natural Resources (SENR), was instrumental in the formulation of my research topic, as he first exposed me to the idea of collaborative conservation and conservation's history of conflict with local people. He also provided valuable feedback on my writing.

Dr. Pintor has guided me through the honors program for the past four years. As my instructor for the honors colloquium, she helped me formulate my research questions, begin collecting resources, and apply for grants. Her support for my unconventional SENR thesis has meant so much.

Many other professors in both SENR and the geography department introduced me to key ideas that surface throughout my thesis.

CENTERING INDIGENEOUS POLITICS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

In addition to my professors, I also owe infinite gratitude to my academic advisors, Sara Fries and Renee Johnston. Without guidance from both, I am confident that I would not be graduating. Also thank you to Kim Keethler, who helped me organize my research funding and navigate the painfully complex process of renting a car internationally at age twenty. Without Sara, Renee, and Kim, I would not have had the resources to conduct my interviews in person, nor to see the beautiful Muskwa-Kechika.

On the same note, I am grateful to SENR, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the Office of International Affairs for valuing my research enough to generously fund my travel in BC through grants and scholarships.

Last, but certainly not least, I need to thank my parents. My parents put a paddle in my hand at age two, introducing me to a lifelong love of the outdoors. Together, they have taught me to cherish nature and instilled in me the value of justice. These lessons have shaped who I am and surface in the work I have pursued through my thesis. More directly, my parents have given so much so that I would have the privilege to attend the Ohio State University. Through twenty-one years of intellectual, emotional, and financial support, they have prepared me for success as a student and propelled me into a promising future.

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APPENDIX

Sample Interview Questions

1. Describe your past and present role and responsibilities with the MKMA.
2. What brings you to the table? What gives the MKMA value in your eyes?
3. How would you characterize the goal of the advisory board? Is it succeeding?
4. Do you feel that the various interests represented on the board are well balanced with one another? Do you feel that all stakeholders have the representation they deserve?
5. Do you feel that advisory board activities impact management within the MKMA? How so?
6. Does the advisory board structure succeed in facilitating collaboration and compromise across broadly positioned sectors? Please share an example illustrating why or why not.
7. In your eyes, would the framework in place be adequate to protect the MKMA wilderness in the face of more intensive industrial interest in the future?
8. Describe the relationship between the advisory board and the provincial government.
9. Describe working with First Nations both at the advisory board level and at a higher governmental level. How does this collaboration change the goals and outcomes of the initiative?
10. Would you characterize the MKMA as an instance of conservationists and First Nations communities working together? Why or why not and to what extent?
11. What is the future of the MK? What does it need to maintain its ideal of a “working wilderness”? What challenges does/will it face?
12. What else should I know?